

Rapture Not Wrath

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

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I want to first read verses 1-3 of 1 Thessalonians 5. Paul said, “But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord...”—this is the key theme of our passage—“...so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, ‘Peace and safety!’ then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape.”

There are two distinct issues that have always fascinated and perplexed human minds. The first relates to what happens after someone dies. Everyone wants to know what happens after death. The second thing that fascinates and perplexes human minds relates to the question, “Is there going to be an end of the world as we know it, and will there be a day of judgment?” The first issue deals with bereavement, and the second issue deals with judgment.

This second section of 1 Thessalonians that deals with prophecy fascinates me. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul deals with the problem of bereavement—what happens after we die, and will the believers who died before the rapture have a disadvantage to those who are alive at the rapture. Now in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Paul deals with the problem of judgment. Is there an end of the world? Is there a time of tribulation? Will God’s wrath be poured out upon the earth? And the big question is—and people wrestle with this today—will we, the church, be left to go through the tribulation, or will we be raptured before God’s wrath will be poured out upon the earth?

There are several questions I want to ask and answer regarding this passage. The world as we know it will come to an end in what the Bible calls “the day of the Lord.” So the first question I want to ask is, verse 2, “What is the day of the Lord?” The answer is in verses 2-3.

But first I want to set the stage in verse 1. Paul says, “But...” That word “but” is called a “disjunctive conjunction.” That means it’s connected but it goes a different way. So Paul is talking about the rapture, in chapter 4, and now he’s talking about “the day of the Lord,” in chapter 5.

Beginning in chapter 4, verse 13, to chapter 5, verse 11, is one section. But chapter 4, verses 13-18, is about the rapture, while chapter 5, verses 1-11, is about “the day of the Lord” or the tribulation. So it is one section but two subjects. Paul doesn’t carry the rapture theme into chapter 5, because in verse 1 of chapter 5 he says, “But...” He’s dealing with another issue.

The first problem was in chapter 4 where Paul dealt with the issue that some believers had died, but the Lord hadn’t come back yet. They wanted to know what would happen to these dead believers when the Lord raptures the church. Paul said, “The dead in Christ will rise first. Then who are alive and remain shall be caught up...”—the Greek word is “harpodzo” or “snatched up by force”—“...together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And

thus we shall always be with the Lord.”

Then Paul begins chapter 5 with “But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.” So Paul is now dealing with a different subject than the rapture.

Now what does Paul mean by “the times and the seasons,” in verse 1? The word “times” is the word “chronology,” and the word “seasons” is the word “characteristics.” Those are the inferences from the Greek words. So when Paul says “the times,” he didn’t need to explain to them the chronology or the order of events or their duration. And he didn’t have to explain to them “the seasons” or the characteristics.

Why would Paul say, “You have no need that I should write to you” concerning the times and seasons? Obviously, it was because he had already instructed them; they already had the information. They knew this. Paul had taught them that the church would not go through “the day of the Lord.” So Paul is explaining to them, to comfort their hearts, that they wouldn’t go through “the day of the Lord.”

“The day of the Lord” is not a 24-hour day. It’s not a one-day period. “The day of the Lord” is a time when God will pour out His wrath upon the earth. It covers what is commonly called “the tribulation” or “the great tribulation,” which lasts for seven years, and it covers the Second Coming of Christ and involves the millennium or the 1,000-year reign of Christ.

So after the rapture has taken place, the Antichrist will be revealed, he makes a covenant with Israel for seven years and that begins “the day of the Lord.” That is when Jesus will return and God will pour out His wrath upon a Christ-rejecting world, and fulfilling the promise God made to David that his Seed would sit upon his throne. It’s called the Davidic covenant.

I believe that Christ’s Second Coming is a literal, bodily coming before the millennium. Jesus’ coming is pre-millennial and that for 1,000 years there will be Christ’s reign upon the earth. And after that, there will be “a new heaven and a new earth” that we call “the eternal state.”

So “the day of the Lord” starts with the tribulation and goes all the way through to the Second Coming and into the millennium.

I want to give you some references regarding “the day of the Lord.” You can read about this period of time in Matthew 24 and 25, which is known as the Olivet Discourse. It is what Jesus taught about the end times. He said that there would be “wars and rumors of wars” and “famines” and “pestilences.” And we actually see these “birth pangs” going on in the world today.

But in Matthew 24 and 25, Jesus was talking about His Second Coming, not the rapture. This is what gets people so confused. Jesus was not revealing what He revealed in John 14:3 where He said, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to

Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.” In Matthew 24 and 25, Jesus was answering the question of the disciples, “What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” When they said “coming,” they meant the Second Coming; they knew nothing of the rapture. So I happen to believe that the rapture is not mentioned in Matthew 24 and 25.

In Revelation 6-20—for that matter, in the whole book of Revelation—you can find out about “the day of the Lord.”

Secondly, “the day of the Lord” is unlike the rapture in that it is common and is talked about in the Old Testament. It is an Old Testament theme as well as a New Testament theme.

But the rapture is called by Paul a “mystery” in 1 Corinthians 15:51. He said, “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.” That’s the rapture at the end of chapter 15 regarding the resurrection of our bodies. So Paul revealed the rapture in the New Testament.

So the rapture was first spoken about by Jesus in John 14, revealed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 and in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

But “the day of the Lord,” our topic, is all through the Old Testament. There are multiple references in the Old Testament to “the day of the Lord.” I will quote only a few of them.

Now there are four facts in our passage about “the day of the Lord.” First, it comes like a thief in the night, 1 Thessalonians 5:2. “For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.”

Years ago there was a movie called Thief in the Night. It scared people to death so they got saved. They didn’t want to miss the rapture. Unfortunately, the rapture’s not the subject of “a thief in the night”; “the day of the Lord” is as “a thief in the night.” We, as Christians, are ready to “meet the Lord in the air.” He’s not going to catch us unawares; we know He could come at any moment in the rapture.

The characteristic of a thief—and Jesus is using this as an analogy—is that they don’t announce their coming. You come home and see that you’ve been robbed. Had you known you were going to be robbed, you’d have been home with your guard dog, your mace and your shotgun, ready to dial 911. You would have been expecting the thief.

So the problem is that “the day of the Lord,” which is the tribulation period or the day of God’s wrath, will catch the world by surprise. Jesus said, in Matthew 24:37-39, “But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming...”—that is, the “Second Coming”—“...of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away...”—in judgment—“...so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.” Here

Jesus is not talking about sinful, wicked behavior; He's talking about common, every day, normal behavior. They were living as though judgment wasn't going to fall.

"It's not gonna happen. I know Noah's building this big, old, honkin boat." Noah probably first built a pulpit and preached to the people who came to watch him build the boat. He was warning them that judgment was coming, but they laughed at and mocked him. So the people got married, went to weddings, went to dinner and lived their lives the way you would live as though there was no end in sight. So this is a picture of the surprise that "the day of the Lord" will bring. So "the day of the Lord...comes as a thief in the night."

Our whole passage is a contrast between the believer and the unbeliever: to the believers, who are light, and to the unbelievers, who are darkness; to the believers, who are awake and watchful, and to the unbelievers, who are not aware. To the "children of the day," who are light, and to the children "of the night" this is a contrast all through this passage.

The second fact about "the day of the Lord" is that it comes with a false peace and security, verse 3. In the first three-and-a-half years of the tribulation, they will be saying, "For when they..."—which are "unbelievers," in contrast to verse 1 that says "you" and verse 2 that says "you yourselves"—"...say 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them..."—or on "unbelievers"—"...as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they..."—that is, "the unbelieving world"—"...shall not escape." So "the day of the Lord" comes "as a thief in the night" and comes with a false sense of peace and security.

After the rapture the Antichrist is revealed. The church is called "the light of the world," but after the rapture, the light will go out of the world, and it will be very dark. You think the world is dark now? Imagine what it will be like when the church, the true believers, are gone from planet earth. The church is "the salt of the earth." Salt was used to fight decay or corruption. And when the church is taken out of the world, the world will become corrupt and decayed.

So the rapture happens, then the Antichrist is revealed—we'll see this in 2 Thessalonians 2, where the Holy Spirit, right now, is restraining the revelation of the Antichrist. I don't believe that the Antichrist can be revealed until the church is taken up, so that's why I think it's futile and foolish for the church to be concerned about who the Antichrist will be.

I don't care who the Antichrist is; I'm looking for Jesus Christ. It seems like we sometimes get more concerned about the Antichrist than we do about Jesus Christ. I'm looking for the Lord to take me to heaven, and that should be our blessed hope.

So the rapture is in chapter 4, and "the day of the Lord" begins in Revelation in chapter 6, when the Antichrist comes on a white horse and has a bow but no arrows. That indicates that he comes as a peace negotiator.

What could be better in the world right now than someone to negotiate peace with this war in Ukraine? If someone could bring peace to this war, they would be hailed as a savior; they would be venerated by the world. So the stage is set not so much for the rapture but for the

Second Coming. But if the rapture happens before the tribulation, how much more imminent is the rapture of the church.

In Daniel 9:27, the Antichrist makes a covenant with Israel for seven years. It is called “the seventieth week” of Daniel’s prophecy of 490 years. This prophecy is one way that we know the tribulation, the time of “Jacob’s trouble,” is a seven-year period.

So we see that the stage is set by what we see as “globalism”; the world becomes one.

We have a chart that shows the chronology of these events. When Jesus died on the Cross for our sins, it began what is known as “the church age.” We presently live in the church age, which began on the day of Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit. It was when the church, the body of Christ, was born, with our living head, Jesus, in heaven. And the church age ends with the rapture, in 1 Thessalonians 4, when the church is “caught up...to meet the Lord in the air.”

Then after the rapture, the Antichrist is revealed and begins a covenant with Israel for seven years in what is known as “the tribulation period.” Then at the end of the tribulation, in Revelation 19, Christ comes back in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and that introduces Christ as the King and begins the kingdom age, the millennium or the 1,000-year reign. At the end of the millennium comes the “great white throne” judgment when all the wicked dead are judged and thrown into hell. That brings “a new heaven and a new earth.” This is a quick overview from the Cross to eternity.

Verse 3 of our text speaks of when the Antichrist comes and makes a covenant with Israel, and people will be saying, “Peace and safety!” So Israel is back in the land, has become a nation and they have this false security. But in the middle of the tribulation, there will be what’s called “the abomination of desolation,” which was spoken of by Daniel and then by Jesus, when the Antichrist will reveal his true colors and command everyone to worship him and get the mark of the beast in order to buy or sell. Then God will begin to pour out His wrath upon the Christ-rejecting world.

So “the day of the Lord” begins suddenly, “as a thief in the night” and they have a time of false peace and security. Then the third fact about “the day of the Lord” is it brings “sudden destruction” after three-and-a-half years at “the abomination of desolation,” verse 3. In Daniel 9:27, Matthew 24:15 and in Revelation 13 we read of this event. This happens during “the great tribulation.”

Now it’s important to know the source of “the day of the Lord” is God Himself; it will be a time from God. Keep this distinction in mind. As Christians, we suffer persecution, we go through times of suffering, but it doesn’t come from God; it comes from the world. But Joel 1:15 says, “Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is at hand; it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty.” This is one of many verses that speak about “the day of the Lord” coming from God. In Revelation 6-19 we see God’s righteous wrath. In Revelation 14:10, in the King James

translation, it says, "The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God."

With the emphasis today on God's love and God's mercy—and we have a politically correct pulpit in so many churches—some preachers don't want to say anything negative; they don't want to talk about wrath or judgment. So they're missing this important part of the Bible. A lot of times it's not what a preacher says, it's what a preacher doesn't say that's important. What he says may be right, but what about God's judgment? What about sin? What about God's wrath? "Oh, we'll just skip over that, because it's negative. We don't want to ruffle people's feathers or upset them."

So the Scripture is clear that God will pour out His wrath. "Destruction" is called for in verse 3. It's not annihilation but destruction. Jesus said, "Unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened." "The elect" refers to the Jewish people living on the earth during that time.

The fourth fact about "the day of the Lord" is that it is inescapable. Paul says, "Then sudden destruction comes upon them, as..."—he gives us an analogy—"...labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they..."—that's the unbelieving world during this time—"...shall not escape."

Isn't it fascinating that he uses the analogy of a woman about to give birth? I've been there when my wife gave birth to our four children. And I know that when a woman is in labor, she reaches that transition stage, she's ready to push, the baby is about to be born, she can't change her mind about having a baby. But she wants to. "I changed my mind! I don't want to be a mother. I don't want to have a baby; this is too crazy! Take me home! Let's go on vacation right now!"

"No; you're staying here! You're not going anywhere! The baby must be born!"

So the message is actually that there will be no escape. In Revelation 6:16, they cry out "to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!'" Think about that. There will be a worldwide judgment of God upon this wicked world.

What is the purpose of the tribulation? I have two points about it. Number one, it is to prepare Israel for Messiah's coming. Nowhere in the Bible is there any purpose stated for the church to go through the tribulation. But it is clear that it will bring Israel to repentance, and "They shall look on Him whom they pierced." They will repent and believe in Christ, and "all Israel will be saved."

Number two, another purpose of the tribulation or "Jacob's trouble," is to punish sinners on the earth. Isaiah 26:21 says, "For behold, the Lord comes out of His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity."

So the purpose of the tribulation was to prepare Israel and to punish unbelieving mankind.

The second question I want to ask is, "Will the church go through 'the day of the Lord'?" This question is answered in verses 4-11. Paul gives us two, main reasons why the church will not go through the tribulation. After reason number one, in light of that, he tells us how we should live. After reason number two, in verse 11, he also tells us how we then should live. So Paul makes the statement that the church will not go through the tribulation, and then he tells us that as a result of that, how we should live.

Reason number one why the church will not go through the tribulation is that we are "the children of light." We are "the children of the day" and not "of the night" nor "of darkness," verses 4-5. "But you, brethren..."—here Paul is clearly referring to believers or the church, as he did in verses 1-2—"...are not in darkness, so that this Day..."—that is, "the day of the Lord"—"...should overtake you as a thief." All through the Old Testament, "the day of the Lord" is described as darkness. Paul basically says, "You're not in darkness; you're children of the day and children of the light." Paul continues, "You are all sons..."—or "children"—"...of light and sons..."—or "children"—"...of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness."

Paul doesn't specifically say that we'll not go through "the day of the Lord," but that is what he means here by his words. "'The day of the Lord' is darkness, but you're light" is what he's saying. He says that "You're 'children of the day' and of light, so why would you be here for the night or for darkness?" He was telling them that he didn't need to write them about this, because they already knew these things.

So we see the contrast between "you" and "yourselves," the believers, in verses 1-2 and 4-5 with "they" and "them," the unbelievers, in verse 3.

The tribulation will be a time of darkness. In Amos 5:18, it says, "Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! For what good is the day of the Lord to you? It will be darkness, and not light." And then in verse 20 of Amos 5, it says, "Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light? Is it not very dark, with no brightness in it?"

So Paul is basically saying, "You are children of light, children of the day and not of the night or darkness." Because of the characteristics of the church and the darkness of "the day of the Lord," the church will not go through that time and period.

Let me give you some more information on pretribulationism, which means that the rapture happens before the tribulation. Number one, the church is never mentioned on earth during the tribulation. In reading Revelation 6-19, you'll discover that nowhere is the church mentioned. The church is on earth in Revelation 2-3 in the seven letters to the seven churches. Then in chapters 4 and 5, we read that the church is in heaven. So the church goes from earth to heaven, and then from chapters 6-19, the church is not seen until the Second Coming, when the church comes back with Christ, from heaven to earth, to reign with Him for 1,000 years. We'll be in heaven having "the marriage supper of the Lamb" and standing before the bema, reward-seat of Christ. We will not be here on earth during this time of tribulation.

With all that is going on in the world today, Christians are so perplexed as to whether or not the church will go through this time of “Jacob’s trouble” or darkness or the tribulation.

Number two, the church in Philadelphia was directly promised by God to be kept from the hour of trial or testing, Revelation 3:10, which is the same as “the day of the Lord.” It says, “Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.”

The third reason why the rapture happens before the tribulation is the doctrine of imminency. It means that nothing has to happen before the rapture comes. If the rapture happens in the middle of the tribulation, the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ is destroyed. We would be looking then for the Antichrist, for “the abomination of desolation.” But we’re not looking for these things, because the Bible commands us to be looking for Jesus Christ. So just the doctrine of imminency alone, which I think is clearly taught in Scripture, supports the doctrine of a pretribulation rapture; that it could happen at any moment.

How should we then live? Verses 6-8 give us the application, in light of the fact that we’re not going to be here for “the day of the Lord.” “Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night.” Now that’s a general rule, because we know that’s not always the case. People do sleep in the daytime. People do get drunk during the day. But usually you sleep at night, and you drink at night. “But...”—here’s the contrast—“...let us...”—“us,” Christians, verse 8; as opposed to “those,” unbelievers, verse 7—“...who are of the day...”—he just said “sons of the day...sons of the night”—“...be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.”

So in verses 6-8, Paul tells us how we should live in light of the fact that we’re “children of light” and “children of the day” and we’re not going through the tribulation. Number one, we should not sleep. The “sleep” here is an analogy to spiritual indifference and lethargy. He’s not saying you can’t take a nap. But you don’t want to be sleeping spiritually. You don’t want to be apathetic. You don’t want to be complacent. You don’t want to be dull of hearing. You want to be awake and alert spiritually about what’s going on in the world; that Jesus Christ is coming soon. So don’t sleep. That’s the negative.

Then, number two, be watchful and sober, verse 6, “Let us watch and be sober.” It’s mentioned again in verse 8. “Sober” is spiritual sobriety. So be awake and don’t get drunk on the things of the world. This is no time to be loving the world. It’s “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life.” This is no time for spiritual sleep, complacency and apathy; we need to be watchful and sober.

Then, number three, we need to put on God’s armor, verse 8. “...putting on the breastplate of faith and love.” Jesus is coming soon, so we should be living by faith in Christ and in His Word, and we should be loving the Lord and loving others. Then verse 8 says we should put on “a helmet, the hope of salvation.” The words “the hope of salvation” is salvation’s future hope of

glory.

Salvation has three tenses: past, present and future; we've been saved, we're being saved and we will be saved. So this aspect of salvation is the future hope that we will be in heaven with Christ. It's called "glorification." The past is that we've been justified, the present is that we're being sanctified and the future is that we will be glorified. So what we are to do in light of His coming is that we are to have that hope that we're going to be in heaven with Him.

Sometimes the Lord will strike me with this truth, and it's such a blessing to realize that I'm actually going to spend eternity in heaven with the Lord. That's an awesome thought! So my car doesn't start—big deal. If the lawn hasn't been mowed—whatever. Jesus is coming again, so who cares about mowing the lawn. I'm going to heaven; I have a future and a hope!

Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you." It's a real place. "I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." So I should be looking for Him to do what He promised, to come for me and take me in the rapture to heaven.

So we put on our shield of faith, we put on love and we put on our helmet, as we wait for Jesus Christ to return.

The second reason why the church won't go through the tribulation, in verses 9-10, is that we are not appointed to wrath. "For God did not appoint us to wrath..."—that's "the day of the Lord," which is a time of God's wrath—"...but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ..."—he just told us to put on our "helmet, the hope of salvation—"...who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep..."—or are "alive" or "dead"—"...we should live together with Him." The phrase "live together with Him" speaks of our union with Christ.

So this says clearly in verse 9 that "God did not appoint us to wrath." That's because verse 10 says that Jesus "died for us." When Jesus died for us, he took God's wrath upon Himself. When I think about the Cross, I think about the fact that Jesus died for me. It's true that Jesus died in my place. It's called "the substitutionary death of Christ."

But Jesus also died for God the Father. It's called "propitiation." Jesus died to satisfy the demands of God's law, which was broken. That demand was death for sinners. The wrath of God the Father was actually poured out on Jesus the Son. That was why Jesus cried out on the Cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?" It was because "He made Him, who knew no sin, to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." So He took our punishment and took God's wrath so that we can be forgiven and spared the wrath of God.

Again, read Revelation 6:16-17, where it speaks of the tribulation being the time of God's wrath. And back to our text, verses 9-10, it says that Jesus took God's wrath for us on the Cross.

Now Paul tells us, in verse 11, how we should live. This is the second application of how we

should live. “Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing.” You might say that we are to live in fellowship with others in the body of Christ, in the family of God. You can’t “comfort each other” and you can’t “edify one another” if you aren’t part of a local fellowship.

This is what was so heartbreaking—and still is today: there have been so many who have fallen away from fellowship during the Covid pandemic. There are Christians still living in fear. Some of them got so complacent, so apathetic and so asleep like the world that they forgot that they need the fellowship of believers. They got so out of the habit of going to church that they fell away from fellowship.

Here in the context of the Lord coming in “the day of the Lord,” it emphasizes that we should “comfort one another” and encourage one another. How can we comfort and encourage one another? We can use the Word of God to read to them, to share with them, and we can pray for them. It’s such a beautiful thing on Sundays to see people praying for one another after the service is over. They greet one another, share the Word with one another and pray for one another.

We can love and serve one another, as the Bible says. We ought to “wash one another’s feet.” We should “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” The Bible says we are to be “forgiving one another.” And all these “one anothers” are to be activated in the fellowship of God’s family, of the body of Christ.

So chapter 5, verse 11, closes with the comfort that the rapture passage closes with in chapter 4, verse 18, where it says, “Therefore comfort one another with these words.” And derive comfort and encouragement from these words, because we’re not here for “the day of the Lord.”

This passage has been a series of contrasts. Believers have knowledge of “the times and the seasons,” while unbelievers are living in ignorance. Believers are living in expectancy, while unbelievers will be caught by surprise as they would by “a thief in the night.” Believers are living in soberness, while unbelievers are drunk in the night, “drunk” on the things of the world. Believers are “children of light” and “children of the day,” while unbelievers live in “darkness” and are “of the night.” Believers have salvation from God’s wrath, while unbelievers await God’s wrath. What contrasts are laid out for us in this passage!

So Jesus died to save us, and we need to trust Jesus as our Lord and Savior and be ready for the rapture of the church.